**THINGS THAT MATTER MOST - DEVOTIONAL PAPERS BY JOHN H. JOWETT**

**02. LOVERS OF GOD by JOHN H. JOWETT**

I WANT to guide the thoughts of my readers to the soul's love for the Lord, and the fitting words must be pure as light and simple as childhood. Not that the subject is simple. There is no subject more delicate, more intangible, more elusive. It is ever the simplicities that most easily evade our intellectual grasp. What more simple than the love of a little child, and yet how spiritual, and therefore how infinite! And so it is when we come to a theme like the soul's love for our God. We feel awkward and clumsy, as if we were dealing with tender and sacred refinements, and we lack the requisite softness of hand and foot. We have not the delicacy of soul for approaching the exquisitely shy and retiring genius; and even if we see her beauties and her manners afar off, we have no fitting speech wherewith to describe her charms. For themes of this kind require not only very rare and special powers of vision, they require an almost equally rare and unique vocabulary. If we are going to speak about the love of the saints, those to whom we speak must not be made to gather like students in a herbalist's museum; they must feel as if they were out in the sunshine, among all sweet and natural things, amid enticing perfumes and lovely hues. They must not be as though they were studying the laws of physics in the classroom, but as though they were basking in the cheery heat rays of the enlivening sun. In our time there have been two men who could move about this field of the soul's love with the incomparable ease of master-lovers--Spurgeon and Newman, and I always repair to them when I want to put a bit of edge on my own sadly blunt and ineffective blade. Both were deeply intimate with the delicate ways of the soul, and with the love-songs of the soul; so much so that when they began to speak about it the warm, luscious words and phrases of the Song of Solomon became their spontaneous ministers of expression.

The dictionary cannot help us in our quest. The dictionary attempts its definition, but when the definition has been given we feel it is a birdless cage, and the sweet, living songster is not there. Here is what the dictionary says: "Love, an affection of the mind excited by qualities in an object which are capable of communicating pleasure." There you have it! But does any young lover or old lover recognize the withered thing? It is not only withered--it is imperfect and broken. I think we must admit that definitions do not take us very far. To try to put love in a phrase is like taking a bit of tender seaweed out of the water; it becomes featureless mush in the hand.

When I turn to the New Testament no definition of love is given. Everywhere there are signs of love's presence, and she is always engaged in ennobling and beautifying service. Her works are manifest, but the worker herself is elusive. Where she moves there is indescribable energy; there are powerful ministries of purity, and diverse experiences are drilled to a common and beneficent end. Everywhere wildernesses become gardens, and deserts are rejoicing and blossoming as the rose. But one thing is said, and said very clearly, and it is this--the way to love our fellows is by becoming lovers of God. "The first of all commandments is, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God." Everywhere this is taught--love for God is the secret of a large, beneficent, and receptive humanity. How, then, can we become "lovers of God"?

First of all, we must consort with the God we desire to love. We must bring our minds to bear upon Him. Love is not born where there has been no communion. There must be association and fellowship. I know that there is "love at first sight." Yes, at a glance the soul leaps to its other half, and completes a union appointed in the deep purpose of God. And I know there is "love at first sight" with Christ. It is even so with multitudes of little children. It is even so with older people; the road of their life has suddenly swerved, circumstances have brought their souls to a new angle, and there He stood, and their soul was in love with Him! But even this first-sight love needs the sustenance of careful communion. That is just what so many of us deny our souls. We do not give ourselves time. We must bring back something of the quietness of the cloisters into our own turbulent life. We must recover something of the seclusion of the monastery, the ministry of fruitful solitude. We must make space to contemplate the glory of the Lord, and especially those characteristics of the Divine life which are fitted to constrain our souls into strong and tender devotion. Says St. Francis: "The death and passion of our Lord is the gentlest and, at the same time, the strongest motive which can animate our hearts in this mortal life; and it is quite true that the mystical bees make their most excellent honey in the wounds of the lion of the tribe of Judah, who was killed, shattered, and rent on Calvary... . Mount Calvary is the mount of Divine love." But the communion must be wider than this. Let me give another quotation from another of the old mystics: "Have the Lord devoutly before the eyes of your mind, in His behaviour and in His ways, as when He is with His disciples, and when He is with sinners, ... setting forth, to thyself in thy heart His ways and His doings; how humbly He bore Himself among men, how tenderly among His disciples, how pitiful He was to the poor, how He despised none nor shrank from them, not even from the leper; how patient under insult; how compassionate He was to the afflicted; how He despised not sinners; how patient He was of toil and of want." But our meditation upon these high things must be real meditation, the meditation that deepens into contemplation, and absorbs and possesses the glory. Our souls must gaze upon the glory until something of the sense of sacred ownership steals upon them. Political economists have recently been saying very much about "the magic of property." The phrase suggests the new and deeper interest we have in things when they become our very own. And when we begin to even faintly realize that God has given Himself to us, and we can truly and reverently use the words "Our Father," "Our Saviour," life becomes the home of wondrous joy and inspiration. "He loved me, and gave Himself for me."

And, in the second place, we must consort with them that are lovers already. It is well that this should be through personal intercourse, if such happy privilege come our way. But if this immediate fellowship be denied us, let us seek their company through the blessed communion of books. Let me name one or two of these great lovers of God, and quote a few of the love phrases by which they describe their high communion. Let us make friends with John Woolman, and hear his speech laden with phrases of this kind: "A motion of love," a "fresh and heavenly opening," "the enlargement of gospel love," "a love clothes me while I write which is superior to all expression," "the heart-tendering friendship of the Lord," "the descendings of the heavenly dew." And let us make friends with Samuel Rutherford. I might quote nearly everything he has written. Let this suffice: "Christ enquired not, When He began to love me, whether I was fair or black... . He loved me before the time I knew; but now I have the flower of His love; His love is come to a fair bloom; like a young rose opened up out of the green leaves, and it casteth a strong and fragrant smell." "If I had vessels I might fill them; but my old, riven, and running-out dish, even when I am at the well, can bring little away... . How little of the sea can a child carry in its hand! As little do I take away of my great sea, my boundless and running-over Christ Jesus." Would it not be a good thing for us to drop some of our reading to spend an hour in communions like these? And then let us seek the company of Andrew Bonar: "I felt something of that word," "my soul longeth, yea, even fainteth," "and I lay down this night intensely desiring to feel constrained by the love of Christ." "I have been getting remarkable glimpses of Divine love in answer to earnest prayer that I might know the love that passeth knowledge." And I feel I must give my readers a little extract from one of this great lover's prayers: "As we get into the enjoyment of Thy love may we find that we need scarcely any other heaven, either here or hereafter, only more of this love and the continuance of it." And we must make friends with Horace Bushnell, a man of the most masculine intellect, and yet with one of the tenderest hearts I know in devotional literature. Read these words, written on the shores of Lake Waramaug, in the evening of his life: "The question has not been whether I could somehow get nearer--nearer, my God, to Thee; but as if He had come out Himself just near enough, and left me nothing but to stand still and see the salvation; no excitement, no stress, but an amazing beatific tranquillity. I never thought I could possess God so completely." "God comes to me--so great, benignant, pure, and radiant. What a wonder is God! What a glory for us to possess Him! "Is there any wonder that these were among his last words: "Well now, I am going home, and I say, the Lord be with you, and sin grace, and peace, and love; and that is the way I have come along home."

There are many other great lovers whose names might have been mentioned, and whose friendship it would be well for us to cultivate. The doors of their hearts are always open, and their fellowship is always ready. But these will suffice. Let me mention a third method by which we shall be helped to become lovers of God. I think we ought to sing the songs of the great lovers, songs that will create and nurse kindred dispositions in ourselves. I mean songs of this kind: "O love that will not let me go"; "O love of God, how strong and true"; "Jesus, the very thought of Thee"; "Jesus, Thou joy of loving hearts"; "Let all men know that all men move under a canopy of love." Songs of this loveful, soaring kind will lift our souls to heaven's gate. The ministry of the lovers' songs is not fully appreciated in the Christian life or they would more frequently be upon our lips. Bird trainers train their little choristers to sing through the medium of other birds whose song is rich and full. And we, too, can train ourselves to become lovers of God by singing the songs of those whose love is passionate and matured.